Charles Lamb's "Distant Correspondents": Speech, Writing and Readers in Regency Magazine Writing

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CHARLES LAMB has always seemed to claim a particular familiarity with his readers. At the high point of his popularity in the early twentieth century, E. V. Lucas compared Lamb favorably with William Hazlitt. For every reader of Hazlitt, he argues, there are "scores of readers of Lamb," a situation he attributes to Hazlitt's lack of "sympathetic companionableness": Hazlitt "has no tendrils; he makes us think, but he never enfolds us."[1] It was this "sympathetic companionableness" with his readers that, even for Lamb's earliest admirers, gave his writing its best qualities. His fellow *London Magazine* writer Barry Cornwall writes: "his looks and movements are transfigured, and communicated to me by the poor art of the printer. His voice, so sincere and earnest, rings in my ear again."[2] Cornwall, perhaps unwittingly, draws attention to the difference between the text as physical, printed object, and the writer's living voice. The "poor art of the printer" is necessarily inadequate to convey the living presence of the man. Lamb, like many of his cohorts in the periodical press of the early nineteenth century, frequently figured periodical writing as a kind of conversation with the reader. The conviviality of Lamb's style is often seen as an uncomplicated virtue, but Lamb sees the relationship between writing and speech more ambivalently. The idea of intimacy in the period is a charged one, particularly as writers began to recognize the dramatic changes in the size and constitution of the audience for print that marked the literary culture of the early nineteenth century, and nowhere more prominently than in the newly dominant field of periodical production. The growth in magazine popularity benefited Lamb, who acknowledges in his most popular essays the value of an immethodical, chatty style. This conversational

1. E. V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols. (London: Methuen and Co., 1905), 1, 250.

2. Bryan Waller Procter [Barry Cornwall], *Charles Lamb: A Memoir* (London: Edward Moxon and Co., 1866), p. 169.

manner, however, comes back to haunt his magazine writing in a way best explained by the changing nature of audience and readership in the period.

While Lucas and Cornwall view Lamb's convivial style as evidence of his ability to transcend his historical circumstances and attain literary value, recent critics have suggested that Lamb is rooted in the material reality of the print culture of the early nineteenth century.[3] For Mark Parker and Mark Schoenfield, Lamb's essays remain tied to their immediate circumstances because of their publication in the *London*. The essays take their meaning from their periodical context because "the structure of magazine publication overrides, dictates, or modifies authorial intention."[4] James Treadwell and Peter Manning have sought to correct this view, while retaining a focus on periodical culture, and I share with Manning and Treadwell a focus on the way Lamb's essays self-consciously confront and negotiate the fraught nature of periodical publication.[5] For readers like Lucas, Lamb's style allows him to bridge the gap between writer and reader suggested by the nature of the period's print culture. Yet this conviviality, I will suggest, is far more complexly registered than such an understanding allows. Lamb's seeming ability to transcend his printed context and "enfold" his readers can in fact be read as part of his relationship with the magazine market. By looking at the way Lamb figures the reader in his essays in the context of developments in print culture and reading audience affecting literary practice in the early nineteenth century, I will argue that Lamb combines an awareness of the material reality identified by historians of reading with the literary resources of elegy. Lamb invokes an anachronistic connection between writer and reader in a way that perpetuates that model, but also marks it as lost.

3. See Mark Parker, *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30-58; Mark Schoenfield, "Voices Together: Lamb, Hazlitt and the *London*," *Studies in Romanticism* 29.2 [Summer 1990], 257-72). For more recent criticism which argues for Lamb's "transcendental" qualities, see Donald H. Reiman, "Thematic Unity in Lamb's Familiar Essays," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 64 (1965), 470-78; and Richard Haven, "The Romantic Art of Charles Lamb," *ELH* 30.2 (1963), 137-46. The most recent book-length study of Lamb is Gerald Monsman's *Charles Lamb as the London Magazine's Elia* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), and he explains Lamb's chatty style biographically, as a relief from domestic stress. Monsman also identifies an aesthetic sensibility as part of Lamb's conversational style (see p. 18).

4. Schoenfield, p. 263.

5. James Treadwell, *Autobiographical Writing and British Literature, 1783-1834* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 209-40; and Peter J. Manning, "Detaching Lamb's Thoughts," in Kim Wheatley, ed., *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 137-46.

I.

LITERARY CRITICS have recently questioned the primacy of the writer in literary history, developing a close attention to the history of reading. Work by William St Clair, John Brewer and James Raven has drawn attention to the variety of readers and the complex historical determination of the experience of reading in the Romantic period.[6] St Clair challenges text-based models of literary history—what he calls "parade" and "parliament" models (an understanding of literary culture based on either the work of the best writers, or the work of particular contemporary writers, read in order of first publication)—proposing instead that critics focus on a history of reading practices. The manner of understanding reading habits proposed by Rolf Engelsing in 1974 has seemed particularly appropriate to this period of extraordinary change in the size of the print market, and St Clair makes use of it.[7] Engelsing argues that a "reading revolution" took place in the mid to late eighteenth century, involving a shift from "intensive" reading (the close and repeated reading of important texts, particularly the Bible) to "extensive" reading (wider, less frequent reading of many texts), the result of legal, sociological and technological developments that opened up the print market. This model has been widely challenged, most influentially by Robert Darnton.[8] Darnton reads a series of readers' responses to Rousseau, and Rousseau's own instructions on reading in his works, offering a model of reading history that challenges Engelsing's. Darnton's model is "intensive," yet dependent on the

6. See William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 125-97; and James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). For an excellent overview, see *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1-21.

7. Rolf Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland, 1500-1800* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974).

8. Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity," *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 215-56. See also Reinhard Wittmann, "Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?" in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 284-312. Wittmann complicates the "reading revolution" model, but argues persuasively that the industrialization of print did produce a revolution in reading practices, if one that cannot be as simply mapped as Engelsing suggests. Brewer argues "obviously 'extensive' reading depended upon a flourishing world of books, but it never extinguished 'intensive' reading—which survives, not least in universities, to this very day" (p. 171).

intensive reading of novels, the very form tied to the "extensive" model. Rousseavian reading is best represented by Saint-Preux's instruction to Julie in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise* to "read little and meditate a great deal upon our reading, or to talk it over extensively between ourselves . . . to thoroughly digest it."[9] Darnton persuasively argues that the revolution Engelsing describes was undermined from the first by the actual habits of readers, but his reading of both Rousseau and his readers suggests that they shared a concern about the possibility of such a shift in reading habits. The "reading revolution" model has seemed an appropriate one, then, if only because so many concerned voices, from Rousseau to Wordsworth, proposed alternative models in that period, models that insisted on "intensity" and were deliberately designed to combat a perceived rising tide of desultory reading practices. The perception (and fear) of a reading revolution, as Reinhard Wittmann has shown, was common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether it happened or not: hence Rousseau's anxious instructions to his readers and his readers' equally anxious responses.[10]

Fears over the development of a "reading revolution" were prompted by the growth of the public for reading in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The "reading world" expanded exponentially in the 1780s and 1790s, and as St Clair argues, "the largest long-term change brought about by the coming of print, the archival record shows, was the astonishingly rapid growth of periodical publications, journals and newspapers."[11] Periodical publication changed in style after the establishment of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802, as Derek Roper and Marilyn Butler have pointed out, but sales figures changed dramatically too.[12] Whereas the most successful periodicals like the

9. Qtd. in Darnton, pp. 227-28.

10. Wittmann, p. 284.

11. St Clair, p. 14. For accounts of the expansion of the print market in this period, see Clifford Siskin, "More is Different: Literary Change in the Mid and Late Eighteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 795-823; and St Clair, particularly his very useful book production figures (Appendix 1, pp. 455-7) and periodical production figures (Appendix 8, pp. 572-77). See also James Raven, *Judging New Wealth*, especially pp. 32-34, where Raven provides a series of graphs which display the exponential increase in book production in the 1780s and 1790s.

12. See Marilyn Butler, "Culture's Medium: The Role of the Review" in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 120-47 and Derek Roper, *Reviewing Before the* Edinburgh, *1788-1802* (London: Methuen and Co, 1978).

Gentleman's Magazine and the *Monthly Review* sold around 3,000-5,000 copies at their height in the 1790s, the *Edinburgh* sold 12,000 copies a quarter by 1818, and the *Quarterly* sold up to 14,000. By the end of the *Examiner*'s first year, Leigh Hunt estimated sales of 2,200, but this increased, particularly during his time in prison from 1813-1815, to above 7,000 weekly. Such figures for these nominally mainstream journals are nothing to William Cobbett's claim of sales of the two-penny version of the *Political Register* of up to 50,000, and other radical periodicals claimed similarly massive print runs.[13] More readers had access to more reading material than ever before, and writers' conceptions of the place of their work in the literary market changed accordingly.

In figuring an audience, writers in the period could not ignore the size of the newly emergent reading public. Jon Klancher has made the influential claim that "the English Romantics were the first [writers] to become radically uncertain of their readers." The anxiety produced by the growth of the "reading public" and the sheer number of new publications, as Klancher and Lucy Newlyn have pointed out, is endemic in the period.[14] For Newlyn, this "anxiety of reception" was prompted by perceived changes in the ways in which books were read. Coleridge is perhaps the exemplary case. In *Biographia Literaria* he charts a process of degradation:

> in times of old, books were as religious oracles; as literature advanced, they next became valuable preceptors; they then descended to the rank of instructive friends; and as their numbers increased, they sunk still lower to that of entertaining companions; and at present they seem degraded into culprits to

13. For figures for the *Gentleman's* and the *Monthly*, see Roper, p. 24. Alvin Sullivan gives similar figures in *British Literary Magazines*, ed. Alvin Sullivan, 4 vols. (London: Greenwood Press, 1983), I, xvii. For figures for the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*, see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 392; the Romantic Circles *Quarterly Review* Archive gives the *Quarterly* a print run of 7,000 up to 1812, taken from Murray's archives: http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/qr/ (accessed December 1, 2006). For sales figures for the *Examiner*, see *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra, 6 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 1, xxxvi. Altick also quotes sales of 2,200 for 1808, while Carl Woodring quotes a figure of 10,000 for the issues leading up to the trial and imprisonment of the Hunts at the end of 1812 ("Leigh Hunt as Political Essayist," in *Leigh Hunt's Political and Occasional Essays*, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens [London and New York: Columbia University Press, 1962], pp. 3-71). For the *Political Register* see Altick, p. 392; see also St Clair, p. 527.

14. Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 3; Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

> hold up their hands at the bar of every self-elected yet not the less peremptory, judge, who chuses to write from humour or interest, from enmity or arrogance.[15]

Coleridge's concern, as Newlyn characterizes it, is partly produced by the increasing importance of the reviews, the effect of which was to subordinate the poet to his reviewer/critic, but his worries also register a wider concern about the way writing was understood, used, and consumed. John Brewer notes a further effect that the perceived shift in reading practices was thought to have had: "The individual book becomes less sacred, the reader more cursory. . . . At the same time, the sheer diversity of literature, consumed by individuals privately, creates a fragmented cultural world."[16] Klancher's point that Romantic-period writers were "uncertain of their readers" is doubly true: writers were not sure *how* their works would be read (they hoped for "intensive" reading, but feared the "extensive" model), but also they no longer knew *who* their readers were. Coleridge worries that he no longer has face-to-face contact with his readers; the increase in the material available for reading has produced a disconnection between author and reader. The nostalgia for a time when books were "oracles" suggests Coleridge's preference for a manner of transmission that had become obsolete; his ideal audience is, as Newlyn and Andrew Bennett have pointed out, an intimate coterie of admirers who are familiar with the poet, not as a printed name, but as a voice. As Bennett suggests, Coleridge's repeated references in his poems to the voice register nostalgia for a time before poetry was mediated through print. The poems betray a sense of irretrievable loss, a sense that "poetry can never be, only talk about, gesture towards, the condition of sound, of noise, of voice."[17]

This phenomenal increase in audience size affects the periodical writers of the age in an intriguing manner. In 1821 the *Recreative Review* commented in a piece on newspapers that "anciently, books

15. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, general ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), VII.I, 57.

16. John Brewer, "Reconstructing the Reader: Prescriptions, texts and strategies in Anna Larpent's reading," in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, p. 243.

17. Newlyn, pp. 49-90, and Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 126.

were read by those who understood them—and a new book did not get among the wrong class of readers—but, as it is a reading world now, an author fares worse in his fame, but better in his purse."[18] As the number of readers increased (constituting "a reading world"), the money to be made from publication increased in proportion, but the audience for reading had become an unknowably large collection of consumers, not a homogenous group of the well educated. Lamb himself recognized that "fancy books sell from fashion, not from the number of their real likers," and it is the fear that, as the number of readers increased, so the value and depth of their reading decreased, that proved unsettling.[19] For Rousseau's readers, it was the fashionable new form, the novel, that encouraged the degraded forms of "extensive" reading that they reacted against, and in early nineteenth-century Britain, the periodical, because of its vast popularity and worryingly broad appeal across a wide social spectrum, became another focus of these anxieties. The *Retrospective Review* in its prospectus of 1820 lamented, "the British public are almost solely occupied by the productions which daily issue from the press; newspapers, reviews, pamphlets, magazines, the popular poetry, the fashionable romances, together with new voyages and travels." The danger is that the sheer volume of such publications will change for the worse the way in which all books are read: "the only real evil to be apprehended from the enormous increase in the number of books is, that it is likely to distract the attention, and dissipate the mind, by inducing the student to read many, rather than much."[20] Coleridge fears the loss of specialized readers—or, better, auditors. If more read, fewer will understand, and those few will be so widely dispersed as to be worryingly unreachable, a point that periodical writers were peculiarly well placed to recognize, their work being both the source and the site of these anxieties.

Periodicals in the early nineteenth century registered a common

18. *Recreative Review*, 1821, I, 57-8.

19. *The Letters of Charles Lamb, to which are added those of his sister Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1935), III, 328. Lucas's edition of Lamb's letters remains the standard edition. Edwin Marrs's edition of the letters (*The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, 3 vols. [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975-8]) supersedes Lucas, but covers only 1796-1817. As I am dealing with Lamb's career as a periodical essayist in the 1820s, I will refer to Lucas's edition throughout.

20. "Introduction" to the *Retrospective Review* (1820) in *Revolutions in Romantic Literature: An Anthology of Print Culture*, ed. Paul Keen (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2004), p. 163.

concern, but, at precisely the moment at which the possibility of a personal connection between writer and reader seemed least likely, periodical writers increasingly adopted a pose of friendliness with their readers. From the first number of the *Examiner*, Leigh Hunt, in common with many of his contemporaries, recognized the "periodical essayist as a writer who claims a peculiar intimacy with the public."[21] Hunt and others like him, in affecting an "intimate," conversational style, were claiming a kinship with the periodical writers of the previous century, especially Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, but the relationship between writer and reader had changed from the coffee-house familiarity of the eighteenth-century *Tatlers* and *Examiners*. Beginning the Table Talk series in the *Examiner* in May 1813 (a series that Lamb contributed to) Hunt hoped that he might "be considered as sitting with the very best and pleasantest part of [his] readers over a glass of old port or a cup of coffee" (May 9, 1813, 299-300). Hunt borrows from Addison and Steele the ambition that periodical writing might share the intimacy of the coffee house. But by the early nineteenth century the pretense of talking with the reader over a glass of port or a cup of coffee was always as likely to bring to mind the distance that separates writer from reader as to generate an intimacy between them. Two months previously, Hunt, settling into his prison cell in 1813, asked his readers the following:

> Let the reader suppose then, that we are fairly seated with his family party,—or, if there is some difficulty in such a fancy, now that we have got a certain magic circle about us in the shape of a high wall, let him transport himself to our own abode. We will treat his imagination very tolerably,—stir up the fire for it,— place it in an elbow chair, with a screen at the back to keep the cold out of its neck,—and now that the evening is set in, and the fetters have done clanking, endeavour to make the place about us comfortable enough to be forgotten. (March 7, 1813, p. 145)

The prison wall around Hunt provides a fitting metaphor for the distance that he is beginning to recognize between himself and his readers. Only the reader's "imagination" is invited to tea, despite the intimacy of Hunt's tone. The relationship between writer and reader had become more like the relationship between actors and an audience: readers are observers of printed intimacy. The best example of such a

21. *Examiner*, January 10, 1808, p. 26. All subsequent references to the *Examiner* are included in the text.

scene is the "Round Table," the imaginative meeting place of Hunt, Hazlitt, Lamb, and other essayists, which serves as a model for many later sites of periodical intimacy, such as *Blackwood's Magazine*'s *Noctes Ambrosianae* or the meetings of the "Fraserians" in *Fraser's Magazine*. The role of the reader is, by 1815, strictly circumscribed. Hunt on the one hand insists that the meeting is not wholly textual—"we are, literally speaking, a small party of friends, who meet once a week at a Round Table"—yet conscious, given the size of his audience, and the newly professionalized nature of authorship, that there is a distance between writers and readers. Only the *Examiner*'s writers may attend the actual Round Table, even if readers are invited to share the printed conviviality: "correspondents, therefore, (and I must here mention that all persons are not actually admitted to the said Table, must write to us in the form of a letter), may address [us] as they please" (January 1, 1815, p. 12). Whereas in the eighteenth-century periodical, writer and reader could, and frequently did, change places, here readers must observe a new distance. Writers might "speak" before their readers, but those readers could not talk back, and were relegated to the letters page. The periodical style becomes increasingly familiar, but writers cannot conceal their awareness that they are addressing an anonymous and unknowable readership.

Blackwood's Magazine, ever keen to mock Hunt, picked up on his intimate style of address in the *Examiner* and particularly in the *Indicator*, which he began in 1819. *Blackwood's* presented him and his readers as part of a world of sickly, effete, tea-drinking dilettantes: "he is always writing about headaches, bile, tea, and suppers of boiled eggs and lettuces, and so persuading his male subscribers that he is '*one of us*'."[22] But *Blackwood's* suggests the contradiction inherent in Hunt's (and, for that matter, its own) style.[23] Hunt "speaks to a sorely dispersed remnant of 'single gentlemen' in lodgings, and single ladies we know not where."[24] Hunt places himself, as *Blackwood's* recognized, in a habit of intimacy with his readers, but that readership is "sorely dispersed," made up of isolated individuals, far removed from the scene

22. *Blackwood's*, September 1819, v, 640; original emphasis.

23. For some of the comic contradictions inherent in the *Blackwood's* style, particularly the loose playfulness with textual and physical bodies, see Peter Murphy, "Impersonation and Authorship in Romantic Britain," *ELH* 59.3 (1992), 625-49.

24. *Blackwood's*, September 1819, v, 639.

of convivial intimacy that Hunt and his fellow periodical writers evoked. Periodical writers suggested an increasing intimacy with their readers at precisely the historical moment when they could no longer be certain who those readers were. At the heart of this intimate style, I will suggest, is not the attempt to combat the practices of a modern reading world, or an attempt to return to older forms of identification between reader and writer. Lamb in particular combines an awareness of modern reading practices with a style that suggests precisely those older forms of identification with readers that that awareness seems to exclude. Readers were cut off from the social scene of reading possible both in the manuscript culture that Coleridge yearns for (with authors as oracles) and the coffee house public sphere onto which Hunt projects his nostalgia.[25] Reading was increasingly recognized as a solitary activity, and as reading audiences expanded, intimacy became material for a joking, if elegiac, style.[26]

II.

In the October 1820 number of the *London Magazine*, two months after Lamb's debut in "Recollections of the South Sea House,"

25. Kevin Gilmartin notices the "nostalgia [Hunt] often expressed for the shared meanings and consensual patterns of an eighteenth-century public sphere" and places Hunt's affectation of intimate ease in a context of his uneasy relationship with the radical print culture of which he was a part. See *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 213. That said, it is a nostalgia of a strained kind: Hunt recognizes, in commencing the Round Table series, that the periodical writers of the previous century lived in a different world, where "living was different from what it is now, and the taverns and coffee-houses made the persons of the wits familiar to every body" (*Examiner*, January 1, 1815, pp. 11-12).

26. Walter J. Ong points out that "Print was also a major factor in the development of the sense of personal privacy that marks modern society. It produced books smaller and more portable than those common in a manuscript culture, setting the stage psychologically for solo reading in a quiet corner, and eventually for completely silent reading. In manuscript culture and hence in early print culture, reading had tended to be a social activity, one person reading to others in a group" (*Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* [London and New York: Routledge, 1982], pp. 130-1). My understanding of Lamb's essays connects Lamb to a specific historical and generic context (the literary magazine in a period of audience expansion), but as Linda S. Kauffman's (*Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992]) and Mary A. Favret's (*Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993]) works suggest, there are fruitful connections between this sense of distance and duplicity and the sense of a duplicity inherent to language that Jacques Derrida develops from an understanding of correspondence in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

appeared one of many tributes to Elia in the magazine's pages, titled "The Cider Cellar."[27] The article attempted to repeat the successful formula of metropolitan elegy that Lamb had established in the "South Sea House." Having given an account of the "foibles and good qualities" of the characters who haunted the old Cider Cellar, and having noted, in Elian fashion, the inevitable passage of time, the author suggests to the editor: "If it be, indeed, that the cider cellar is deserted, let me recommend to you, Mr. Editor, and half a dozen of your lively colleagues, to meet there once a week, and I have little doubt but the place will flourish and soon be as pleasant as ever."[28] The article, while posed as a letter to the editor, is clearly intended for public consumption. The suggestion seems to be that readers, having read this article, could join the writers in the Cider Cellar. The idea of the contributors and readers of a magazine like the *London* merrily carousing together is frequently invoked by writers like Hunt and the *London*'s contributors, and finds its most famous expression in the *Noctes Ambrosianae* of *Blackwood's Magazine*, an extraordinary series of semi-fictional, often drunken, conversations between exaggerated magazine "personalities" supposed to meet in an Edinburgh tavern. The Cider Cellar, at number 20 Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, was in fact in frequent use by writers at this time (the *Examiner* office was situated at 21 Maiden Lane between 1812 and 1817), just as the *Blackwood's* writers did indeed drink at Ambrose's tavern in Edinburgh. The joke in both cases, as Peter T. Murphy has recognized of the *Noctes*, is that such performances of conviviality can remain only performances for a readership of several thousand.[29] The brand of convivial familiarity that Lamb (as Elia) and writers like Thomas Griffiths Wainewright were propagating in the *London* would naturally suggest such a meeting to readers and other writers alike. But the fiction that the author of "The Cider Cellar" entertains is the idea that the convivial warmth suggested by magazine writing could be translated for magazine readers into a reality available to an impossibly large readership. Tom Mole has pointed out that Byron's poetry creates a "hermeneutic of intimacy," allowing

27. Claude A. Prance and Frank P. Riga (*Index to the* London Magazine [New York: Garland Publishing, 1978]) attribute this article to the poet and dramatist Barry Cornwall.

28. *London Magazine* II, 388. Hereafter *LM*, with volume and page numbers inserted into the text.

29. Murphy, p. 644.

Byron to become "known" to a mass audience that he would never know.[30] Periodical writers toyed with the idea of intimacy with their readers, despite the fact that a readership of several thousand could not know these writers personally. The writer of "The Cider Cellar," like many in the period, makes the relationship between reader and writer the subject of a joke, but he does so in a way that suggests that the distance can, literally, be transcended. Such an invitation contains the central issue at stake in the convivial style. As a literal meeting between writers and such a large readership is impossible, the literary representation of such meetings becomes peculiarly charged.

In a *London* piece on writing and speaking, Hazlitt focuses on the immediacy of fine speaking as opposed to fine writing: "The habit of speaking is the habit of being heard, and of wanting to be heard: the habit of writing is the habit of thinking aloud, but without the help of an echo" (*LM*, II, 30). The presence of the audience is central to Hazlitt's conception of conversation: whereas writing has only "a sounding-board in the ear of posterity" (*LM*, II, 29), speaking depends on the presence of vivacious company. Yet, as Lamb himself recognized, magazine writing in the 1820s frequently figured itself as "a talk with the reader." In the preface he contemplated for the 1823 edition of the *Essays of Elia*, Lamb had thought of asking his readers to "take these Papers, as they were meant; not understanding every thing perversely in the absolute and literal sense, but giving fair construction as to an after-dinner conversation; allowing for the rashness and necessary incompleteness of first thoughts." Lamb had second thoughts, though, and the 1823 collection appeared without a preface: "The Essays want no Preface: they are *all Preface*. A Preface is nothing but a talk with the reader; and they do nothing else."[31] Lamb conceives of his writing as a conversation with the reader, which he contrasts with the printed book. In another Elia essay, Lamb criticizes the conversation of Scotchmen as being overly methodical: it is "as a book" (*LM*, IV, 153). A book is a space of self-contained truth; conversation is of necessity incomplete, miscellaneous, and never self-contained because its meaning is always dependent on an immediate audience. Lamb's

30. Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

31. *Letters*, II, 350. Emphasis is original.

brand of magazine writing is ambivalently poised between the proprieties of the written and the spoken: intimate and immethodical like conversation despite its obviously textual nature, the confusion of his modes of address suggests a new understanding of the division between writing and speaking.

Thomas Griffiths Wainewright was perhaps the *London*'s most prolific source of what he himself called a "chitty-chatty" writing style. In the September 1821 number he positions himself "now sitting in a church-yard, seventy-three miles from London, without a single book, either in my pocket or portmanteau." His "now" is significant, and characteristic: Wainewright presents his writing as if it were an extempore effusion. "Therefore," he continues, "my unknown friends, as soon as my messenger returns from the village with some materials for writing, I shall expostulate a few of the above-mentioned [topics] to ye" (*LM*, IV, 285). An essential aspect of the act of writing is that words can be pondered over, revised, reordered: but, for Wainewright, prose is created in the present tense. Allowing his articles to ramble between personal recollections, bantering references to his fellow contributors, art criticism, and flights of rhetorical whimsy, Wainewright takes to an extreme the conversational mode. In one aside he remarks, "I can't stop now, because I have a sentence getting cold" (*LM*, VI, 446), self-consciously revealing the absurdity of attempting to combine the friendly immediacy of speaking with the written form. Writing is not like speaking because it does not depend on the impulse of the moment, but is the result, as Hazlitt argues in his *Table-Talk* essay, of patience, consideration, and time. Sentences are always cold, and the idea of writing for "unknown friends," comforting though the idea may be, is inherently self-contradictory.

Lamb, like Wainewright, realizes that magazine writing affords creative possibilities in its mingling of the proprieties of the written and the spoken; in his Elia essays, however, he acknowledges the ways in which the reader's role in this intimacy produces only a sense of absence. Hazlitt again provides the key in his discussion of the characters who attended the "lively skirmishes" at the Lambs' Thursday evening parties (*LM*, II, 257). Describing Leigh Hunt's conversation, Hazlitt writes,

> H— goes there sometimes. He has a fine vinous spirit about him and tropical blood in his veins: but he is better at his own table. He has a great flow of pleasantry and delightful animal spirits: but his hits do not tell like L—'s [Lamb's]; you cannot repeat them the next day. He requires, not only to be appreciated, but a select circle of admirers and devotees, to feel himself quite at home. (*LM*, II, 258)

Hazlitt moves swiftly from private conversation to the public prints:

> The same things that tell, perhaps, best, to a private circle round the fireside, are not always intelligible to the public, nor does he take pains to make them so. He is too confident and secure of his audience. That which, with the assistance of a certain liveliness of manner, may be entertaining enough, may read very flat on paper, because it is abstracted from all the circumstances that set it off to advantage. (*LM*, II, 259)

Hunt's problem, even in a periodical like the *Indicator* (which Hunt described as his "private room, his study" where he could "retreat from public cares," as opposed to the public "tavern-room" of the *Examiner*), is that he may appear too easily confident of his relationship with his audience.[32] Hazlitt recognizes the central tension in magazine writing here, and his contrast between Hunt and Lamb is telling. Hunt's "hits" do not "tell," because he is not wary enough of the circumstantiality of such a style: mistaking the reading public for an extension of his Cockney School coterie, Hunt's public conversation fails to satisfy Hazlitt's requirements for good magazine writing. Hazlitt's view of Hunt's "failure" need not be taken as normative, but it does suggest a recognition among magazine writers of the poised status of the magazine text.[33] Hazlitt's juxtaposition of Hunt and Lamb, while it might unduly diminish Hunt's understanding of these literary conditions, does recognize that Lamb was offering a quite different conception of the relationship between print and audience.

Lamb's understanding of magazine culture made him an adept conversationalist in print, and the way he attends to the circumstantial nature of such conversations best displays that understanding. Lamb frequently, like Wainewright, offers his text as an extempore composition rather than the result of meditative contemplation. The essay

32. *Indicator*, October 20, 1819, p. 9.

33. Hunt indeed can be remarkably subtle in his conception of his relationship with his readers. See for example *Examiner*, January 10, 1808, p. 26; *Examiner*, January 1, 1815, pp. 11-13; and *Examiner*, June 13, 1824, pp. 369-70.

"All Fools' Day" provides a particularly fine example:

> The compliments of the season to my worthy masters, and a merry first of April to us all!
>
> Many happy returns of this day to you—and you—and *you*, Sir—nay, never frown, man, nor put on a long face upon the matter. Do not we know one another? what need of ceremony among friends? (*LM*, III, 361; original emphasis)

Lamb's welcoming exclamation establishes a clubbable familiarity between the writer and a community of readers. The collective "us" is followed by the textual enactment of the physical act of greeting ("you—and you—and *you*, Sir" standing in for the doff of the hat and the shake of the hand). This seems a scene such as the author of "The Cider Cellar" would have appreciated, but for Lamb such intimacy is always tempered by a sense of irony: "Reader, if you wrest my words beyond their fair construction, it is you, and not I, that are the *April Fool*" (*LM*, III, 363; original emphasis). Elia invites his readers into his confidence, but only on the basis that the effect of intimacy is recognized for what it is: an effect, not a reality. Words, even invitingly conversational words like these, in the end remain simply marks on a page.

In his "Jews, Quakers, Scotchmen, and other Imperfect Sympathies," an essay in which Elia ironically entertains a series of prejudicial opinions in order to display the unsystematic nature of his mind, Lamb gives an account of the non-Scottish people with whom he is in perfect sympathy, those who are "content with fragments and scattered pieces of Truth" (*LM*, IV, 152): "their conversation is accordingly. They will throw out a random word in or out of season, and be content to let it pass for what it is worth. They cannot speak always as if they were upon their oath—but must be understood, speaking or writing, with some abatement" (*LM*, IV, 153).[34] Building on this sense of unsystematic impulsiveness, he suggests "the notion of two kinds of truth—the one applicable to the solemn affairs of justice, and the other to the common proceedings of daily intercourse" (*LM*, IV, 155).

34. This immethodical lack of system was something Lamb recognized as a feature of his mind as early as 1803: in a letter to William Godwin, he writes "I can vehemently applaud, or perversely stickle, at *parts*; but I cannot grasp at a whole" (*Letters*, I, 362. Emphasis is original). *Blackwood's Magazine* makes the same point: "he is like a well-bred, ill-trained pointer. He has a fine nose, but he won't or can't range. He keeps always close to your foot, and then he points larks or tit-mice." (April 1822, XI, pp. 486-87).

The Elia essays demand to be taken conversationally. The essays deal with "scattered pieces of Truth"; the reader is invited to "hover" with Elia "upon the confines of truth, or wander in the maze of a probable argument" (*LM*, IV, 153). The reader, that is, must understand that such magazine conversation, though written, is tied to its immediate circumstances in a way not expected of the written form. Lamb famously extends this notion to the idea of personal identity in the figure of the "phantom cloud of Elia" (*LM*, III, 6) but it affects the idea of truth in every part of his essays. In the postscript to "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple" he responds to another correspondent: "Henceforth let no one receive the narratives of Elia for true records! They are, in truth, but shadows of fact—verisimilitudes, not verities" (*LM*, IV, 284). "Lively sallies and connected discourse are very different things," (*LM*, II, 260) as Hazlitt puts it, and the conversational nature of Lamb's magazine prose makes at once for an important sense of literary freedom (and, as Tim Milnes has argued, a philosophical freedom too), but also, by foregrounding the circumstantiality of such truth, it results in a radical uncertainty.[35] Lamb recognizes quite self-consciously in his magazine writing what Hazlitt suggests Hunt failed to see—that to write conversationally for the modern magazine market depends on an ambivalent conception of audience. Conversation works on the basis that it takes its impulse from immediate circumstances, from the knowledge of time, place and the nature of one's auditors: writing that poses as conversation must be similarly circumstantial, but it must also be informed by a recognition of the distance that separates the writer from the reader.

Lamb's most telling meditation on this aspect of magazine prose is in "Distant Correspondents," framed as a letter to Barron Field in Sydney. Reflecting on the difficulties of long-distance correspondence, Lamb writes, "one drops a pacquet at Lombard-street, and in twenty-four hours a friend in Cumberland gets it as fresh as if it came in ice. It is only like whispering through a long trumpet" (*LM*, V, 282). Hunt

35. Tim Milnes, "Charles Lamb: Professor of Indifference," *Philosophy and Literature*, 28.2 (2004), 324-41. Seamus Perry makes a similar point about the greatest talker of the age, Coleridge, suggesting that for Coleridge conversational contingency, by allowing him to balance the competing claims of detail and whole, unity and multeity, becomes the foundation of Coleridgean thought. See "The Talker" in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 103-25.

had considered his readers as "correspondents," not partakers in the printed social scene, and for Lamb the reader has a similarly qualified role. Conversational freshness, the sense of immediate contact between writer and addressee, is as important for Lamb in the essay as in the epistle, and a sense of elegiac longing for such intimacy pervades the essay. News, sentiment and puns, which Lamb identifies as the three major areas of "epistolary matter" (*LM*, v, 282), all lose their zest over time and distance: "this confusion of tenses, this grand solecism of *two presents*, is in a degree common to all postage" (*LM*, v, 282; original emphasis).[36] Lamb laments the predicament of being caught between the two presents:

> puns and small jests are, I apprehend, extremely circumscribed in their sphere of action. They are so far from a capacity of being packed up and sent beyond sea, they will scarce endure to be transported by hand from this room to the next. Their vigour is as the instant of their birth. The nutriment for their brief existence is the intellectual atmosphere of the by-standers. (*LM*, v, 283-84)

If conversation is by nature contingent, writing that poses as a conversation with the reader becomes strained and elegiac. Lamb's magazine prose, writing as conversation, depends upon the presence in the text of an auditor, but here Lamb sees only his distance from his reader: "the weary world of waters between us oppresses the imagination. It is difficult to conceive how a scrawl of mine should ever stretch across it. It is a sort of presumption to expect that one's thoughts should live so far. It is like writing for posterity" (*LM*, v, 282). Lamb here wittily undermines the contemporary Wordsworthian/Coleridgean notion of the posthumous life of writing, but for writing as precariously poised as his own, the implications are difficult to avoid. Lamb's evident sadness is not only for an unreachable friend, but, as his reference to "writing for posterity" suggests, for the fate his own article faces.

Lamb figures himself "insensibly chatting to you as familiarly as when we used to exchange good-morrows out of our old contiguous

36. Lamb had frequently considered the sense of "two presents" in his letters: see the letters to Thomas Manning, May 10, 1806, December 5, 1806, and, perhaps the most entertaining variation on the theme, his letter of December 25, 1815, where he announces the deaths of Coleridge, Godwin, Mary Lamb and others: "empires have been overturned, crowns trodden into the dust, the face of the western world quite changed" (*Letters*, II, 182), and Godwin's "systems and his theories are ten feet deep in Cripplegate mould" (*Letters*, II, 183).

windows" (*LM*, V, 284), addressing "B. F. Esq. at Sydney." But of course that letter was sent in 1817, nearly five years before the essay. Here he is trying to establish an intimacy not with Barron Field, but with an unknown, anonymous person, the reader. Lamb contrasts the two presents involved in writing a letter: "*my Now*" is not "*your Now*," but equally, Lamb's Now is not the Now of his reader; writing persists, but speech is of the moment. Lamb's recognition that the ephemerality of a good pun depends upon the "intellectual atmosphere of the by-standers" haunts his magazine conversation. When writing aspires toward the condition of chit-chat, one cannot avoid the sense that it is caught in a double-bind. Conversation, as Hazlitt recognized, depends upon the knowledge of an audience, yet when conversation becomes writing, that audience is absent, dematerialized into a readership. Both Hazlitt and Lamb recognize that such writing involves a "presumption" of audience and circumstance that cannot really be maintained. The reader is always in the second "*Now*," and writing can only record the trace of a lost familiarity. Rather than attempting, as many magazine writers in the period did, to revive the lost contact between writer and reader, Lamb's writing, more adept, more knowing, elegizes the distance between them.

Leigh Hunt valued Lamb's "speculations on humanity, unostentatiously scattered about in comments and magazines."[37] But conveying one's thoughts in "comments and magazines" brought its own problems. The familiarity of the magazine form allowed writers a considerable freedom of style in the 1810s and 1820s, and Lamb was one of the most adept in making capital of this freedom. But such print familiarity was always fictional, and Lamb knew it. Hazlitt's exclamation in "The Conversation of Authors" after a near ecstatic account of a night at Lamb's—"Those days are over! . . . . There is no longer the same set of persons, nor of associations" (*LM*, II, 258)—hangs over all of these magazine conversations. Lamb writes into the essays his understanding of how tenuous his connection with his audience must necessarily be, how fleeting such pleasures are. Lamb's use of the essay, even as it revels in the freedom of the conversational mode, does not attempt to escape the complexities inherent in publishing in this period. Lamb's

37. From the Preface to *Foliage* (1818), in *Leigh Hunt's Literary Criticism*, ed. Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 129.

sense of elegy, so often praised by critics as proof of his artistry, can be understood as part of his recognition of the embeddedness of his writing in the early nineteenth-century magazine market. For many writers in the period, the expanded size of the print market suggested an anxious, even antagonistic understanding of a debased "reading public." Other writers unquestioningly assumed that the gap between reader and writer could be transcended by adopting a conversational style. Lamb offers a form of writing that bears the marks of his recognition of the necessarily new relationship between writer and reader, but that, rather than simply mourning something lost, takes a subtle, ironic, literary power from these apparent difficulties. A consideration of the history of reading practices and the rise of print culture often produces readings that suggest that writers are simply subject to the conditions in which their writing is consumed. But placing literary work in this context can equally reveal the productive element that a recognition of publishing conditions can occasion. The magazine essayists turned magazine writing into a vivacious combination of the written and the spoken; yet, just as Hazlitt's account of Lamb takes joy in something he recognizes to be irrecoverable, so Lamb's recognition that the reader is of necessity divided from him by both space and time produces a form of writing that brilliantly, elusively, registers the pervasive influence of a print market that he does not attempt to escape.

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